

‘Artist as Activist’: promoting collections, outreach and community learning

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by their new university president's call for global outreach and a desire for community partnerships, several libraries at the Ohio State University worked with the Columbus Museum of Art on a proposal for exhibitions and public programming. Called 'Artist as Activist' this exhibition and educational program proposed a dynamic collaboration between the institutions, with the goal of broadening the audience for the museum's and the libraries' collections and developing an inclusive educational and dissemination model.

BACKGROUND

The Ohio State University (OSU) hired a new president in 2007 and with him came a redefinition of what outreach means to the university. No longer is outreach considered a university-centered proposition. Rather, employees at all levels of the institution are expected to promote the university and its programs to people outside the school. For librarians in particular, this revision was a new way of thinking about engagement and who our patrons are. So often our outreach is student -- and faculty-centered, but now we were being told that this was not enough and that the entire world needed to be informed of our services and collections. This is an enormous challenge, but it also provides us with opportunities to try new ideas and programs that before this time might not have been supported by the administration. And fortunately, I was already a member of a committee that was developing a plan which had goals that reached well beyond the campus.

In the winter of 2007, several months before I started working as the fine arts librarian, Ohio State and the Columbus Museum of Art began meeting to discuss methods of partnership between the libraries and the museum. Ohio State is a huge institution -- at the last count, we had approximately 50,000 students -- and the library system reflects its population. In addition to the main library, we have 27 subject-specific and branch libraries and many special collections that are located throughout the campus. One of the unique qualities of the library and museum project was that it brought together in a focused project librarians from seven different departments on campus: the Fine Arts Library, the Theatre Research Institute, the Cartoon Research Library, University Archives, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Technical Services and, interestingly, the Veterinary Medicine Library, whose librarian was asked to serve as a neutral member of the committee and as the project coordinator for the initial stages of the partnership. Although the Veterinary Medicine Library and its librarian have no affiliation with art, her focus on strategic

planning and the 'big picture', rather than on what work and artists could be included in the project, helped to keep it on target and to move our agenda forward in a timely fashion, enabling the group to apply for a \$500,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Representatives from the Columbus Museum included its curator for American art and members of its registrar, development and education departments. Although the Museum has borrowed from the OSU libraries' collections in the past and has used them for reference help, this was the first time that an official partnership had been formed between the libraries and the Museum.

WHAT IS THE PROJECT?

In 2005, the Columbus Museum purchased objects from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art. This collection is particularly strong in 20th-century art in which the artist takes an activist role to produce work that focuses on issues such as civil rights, gender equality, war protest and economic disenfranchisement. Because of this purchase, the Museum's collection has become one of the premier compilations of art of this type in the United States. Some of the works have already been displayed, and the museum has launched a web site featuring images from the collection and lesson plans for kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers.^[sup1] However, the education and curatorial departments were interested in an audience that expanded beyond those people who came to the museum, and in interactive displays and sites that would encourage audience participation; they wanted a partner with whom they could develop an entire exhibition devoted to art that works with social issues. Thus, our team was founded.

The first meetings were used to work through ideas and to discover which parts of our collections would work well together for such a project. What has resulted is a vision for a dynamic cross collections program that will involve an exhibition, a symposium, an interactive web site, and educational activities. Under the umbrella theme called 'Artist as Activist', we identified three topics that are pertinent to our city and region to which the Museum and the libraries could contribute materials, expertise and ideas towards programming: the welfare of children, civil rights and artists' responses to war. These three areas hit close to home in Ohio: we are living in one of the poorest states in the United States; we have large African-American and immigrant communities, especially in our cities; and Ohio is one of the states hardest hit by casualties from the United States' military activities. As we envision them, the programs will reach the entire region through an exhibition in recovered downtown space that is owned by the university, through school programs and lesson planning; it will make a commitment to intergenerational interaction with activities for senior citizens, and elements online and in the exhibitions that will allow for sharing and response from our visitors. The notion that the programs would be geared toward adult learners as well as school-age children was of particular importance to the libraries, as our primary constituents are adults and part of our mission statement is a commitment to lifelong learning.

THE LIBRARY CONTRIBUTION

The libraries will play multiple roles in the 'Artist as Activist' project. First, we will contribute objects for the exhibition. The Cartoon Research Library, because of its vast editorial cartoon holdings, is an ideal collection to contribute material to such an exhibition. Throughout the history of comics, cartoonists have used their medium to promote political views, to serve as propaganda for decisions made by the administration, and to raise consciousness among their readers. The Theatre Research Library owns costumes, set designs and posters from original productions, as well as first editions of plays, many of which also address issues that will be covered in the gallery show. Material created for plays such as those by Langston Hughes and Arthur Miller would be ideal for this exhibit. Unlike in other exhibitions, the library collections will not act to supplement the Museum's objects, but will be of primary interest in their own right, serving to indicate an entire material culture that surrounded the exploration of these topics by fine and graphic artists, writers and performers.

A second role for the libraries will be that of 'story-keepers'. OSU's libraries have become very involved in digital storytelling and have conducted workshops and days devoted to the encouragement of shared narratives by patrons, university employees and the community. As part of this program, the libraries will sponsor blogs to allow visitors to the exhibit to share their own experience related to the Art and Social Activism collection, and will offer storytelling stations at the exhibit itself to share on-the-spot experiences. Part of our business as librarians would then be to archive these stories to develop the oral history of our region and to protect it for future researchers.

Finally, the libraries will work as the university liaison for the program, spurring other departments to become involved as well. For example, OSU has recently begun exploring the benefits of 'service learning' for students and faculty, in which part of a class's curriculum is devoted to serving the region in some way that sponsors an interest in service among the students, offers real-world experience for undergraduates, and benefits the community by identifying a need related to the goals for the class. For the 'Artist as Activist' project, the libraries have enlisted a graphic design professor and one of his classes to work with us in order to design a web presence for the online portions of the program and to create exhibition-related paraphernalia, such as brochures and art trading cards. This means that our promotional materials will be designed without cost to the program or the partners and that they will be attractive and accessible for all of our audience.

Of course, much of the actualization of these ideas will rely on our group being awarded grant money. However, we have agreed that it is important both for the grant proposal and for our audience that we dedicate ourselves and our collections to at least some elements of the proposal, even if grant funding is not forthcoming. I am confident that an exhibition and its online accompaniments will occur regardless of funding, both because of the interest in the topics generated by the partnership and also because an exhibition in OSU-owned space will make possible continued programming and presence in the community by the Museum during the renovation and expansion it is currently planning.

OUTCOMES

Already I have seen the benefit to the libraries of such a collaboration between the libraries and the Museum. Because I am a relatively new employee, this project served as an excellent way for me to familiarize myself with a large institution and its various departments. Before serving on this committee, I had no idea of the depth and breadth of the OSU libraries' collections. It also served to introduce me to Museum employees, their goals, and their research needs. The Museum has only a very small library with no on-site librarian. In my discussions with the curators since our first meeting, they have made me aware of the importance of the OSU Fine Arts Library to their writing and to the ways they think about and understand art. Museum employees are members of my patrons about whom I had not been told when I interviewed for my position, but they are a vital part of my off-campus outreach. This can only increase as the 'Artist as Activist' program gets underway: I will be the project manager for the three-year plan, which will consume about 25% of my time. As for the libraries at large, the partnership with the Museum has helped us to understand other special collections in the city and has been important for establishing relationships on projects beyond developing 'Artist as Activist'. The libraries are going to be part of a large exhibition at the Museum during the fall of 2008 called 'Objects of Wonder from The Ohio State University', in which we get to showcase treasures that have been residing in our special collections. And the Fine Arts Library, the Cartoon Research Library, the Theatre Research Library and the Historic Costume Collection have also been collaborating on a graduate class offered to history of art students that will focus on collecting, exhibitions and the theories behind amassing materials, that will be a complement to an undergraduate class that the American Art curator at the museum is already teaching on museum studies. All of these projects allow the libraries to put themselves forward as producers of programs and cultural arbiters, and not as mere repositories. The 'Artist as Activist' project has given us valuable roles to play in the community, has prompted a strong working relationship with the Columbus Museum of Art, and has encouraged us to be active, as well.

POSTSCRIPT

A few months after this article was submitted for review, the Artist as Activist team learned that its grant proposal had not received funding from the IMLS. Already the group has met to discuss next steps for the project, including possibilities for tying elements of the educational and outreach programming to the museum's re-opening celebrations after its renovation is complete, and for other avenues of funding. I am confident that our efforts were not wasted, not least because of the strong relationship that the OSU librarians now have with the members of the Columbus Museum's curatorial and education staff.

REFERENCE

1. The Columbus Museum's lesson plans focus on Ohio students between the ages of five and 18 and are in compliance with the Ohio Department of Education content standards, <http://artandsocialissues.cmaohio.org/>.



[Image of painting]

George Tooker, American, born 1920. Lunch. 1964, Egg-yolk tempera on panel. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio: Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art 1930-1970.